

# GAUDIUM ET SPES: and LAÏCITÉ<sup>1</sup>

## A Philosophical Understanding in Anticipation of Posthumanity

[original essay by Allan M. Savage, D.Litt.] (Six pages)

A *philosophical* posthuman understanding of life consists of new interpretations within academia which in fact amount to a shift in the Western philosophical conception.<sup>2</sup> Western philosophical interpretation in the future will not be undertaken within the same philosophical perspectives of the past since European philosophy has given rise to a technological civilization. What makes this drive to technology so strong is that philosophers still believe that they are working to liberate mankind from its earlier fetters imposed by the natural order and tradition. In Grant's words:

Man has at last come of age in the evolutionary process, has taken his fate into his own hands and is freeing himself for happiness against the old necessities of hunger and disease and overwork, and the consequent oppressions and repressions. The conditions of nature — that “otherness” — which so long enslaved us, when they appeared as a series of unknown forces, are now at last beginning to be understood in their workings so that they can serve our freedom.<sup>3</sup>

All aspects of contemporary life are affected by this new technological paradigm which continues to raise new philosophical questions, the answers to which cannot always be anticipated in advance. Our lived situation is philosophically existential and we are “here” in a new interpretive intellectual “land” that is, in fact, a *terra incognita*. With respect to religion in general, and the Christian religion in particular, many philosophers are uncertain in their understanding and acceptance of the faith.

In posthumanity the central philosophical question about God becomes not “does God exist?” the humanist philosophical question, but, rather “what place in posthuman conscious reflection does God occupy, if any?” (Hence the principle of *laïcité* is significant and this should become apparent as this inquiry proceeds.) Or alternatively expressed the issue is: has Christian revelation, once and for all, been received decisively and thus accepted as an answer for future understanding couched in terms of the past? To answer this question the posthuman philosopher and theologian need to review “classical” humanism from an historical understanding of how we arrived where

---

<sup>1</sup> Some Catholic readers may be familiar with Giuseppe Alberigo's understanding of the term as outlined in “*Facteurs de laïcité au Concile Vatican II*” in *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, tome 74, fas. 2, 2000, in which he writes in a footnote: “Ce mot est utilisé dans le sens du processus de ‘décléricalisation’ à l’intérieur de l’Église et non pas pour indiquer une orientation pour l’autonomie de l’État vis-à-vis de l’Église.” My approach is the opposite. I use the term to indicate the exterior status of autonomy of both the Church and State from each other in their respective realms of jurisdiction.

<sup>2</sup> I say “posthuman,” not “post-classical,” because while at first blush it may appear that Western philosophy has advanced beyond the classical age of philosophy, the high degree of technological intervention (unavailable in the classical age) indicates, not only an advancement, but an alteration of the human being's status within creation vis à vis a classical understanding of human nature. That is to say, “when computer science is combined with quantum physics and nanotechnology, the result may soon be a combination of a human being and machine” (Hellsten, Sirkku (2012:5) [“The Meaning of Life” during a Transition from Modernity and Postmodernity, in *Journal of Anthropology*, <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/janthro/2012/210684/>].

<sup>3</sup> Grant, George (1969:28) *Technology and Empire* Anansi.

we are today. It must be borne in mind that the movements of religious and secular history, though related, cannot be synchronized but each develops on its particular timeline. Among the many factors that I could have selected to investigate posthumanity, I consider the evolution of human consciousness to be key in revealing an understanding of posthuman theism which allows for a new image of humanity. In the evolution of human consciousness there is an allowance for a new philosophical interpretation of the human being as both effecting and affected by the intervention of technology and scientific progress.

To my mind, the phenomenological philosophical perspective evident in *Gaudium et Spes*, although not readily apparent, provides an opportunity to explore this dual notion of effectivity and affectivity.<sup>4</sup> Thus, I explore this pastoral constitution from the perspective of literary criticism without specific reference to the orthodoxy of catechetical or theological intent, although they overlap. A task of philosophers within modernity has been to distinguish clearly between the disciplines of philosophy and theology. This task of distinguishing the two will continue to evolve within the posthuman understanding of human intellectual activity. I seek out such evidence of this in *Gaudium et Spes*.

The Council addresses the contemporary “world as the theatre of human history, bearing the marks of its travail, triumphs and failures” which include many philosophical perspectives concerning the meaning of the individual living in modern society.<sup>5</sup> In its contemporary philosophical structure and intellectual activity, the church “is not motivated by earthly ambition but is interested in one thing only — to carry on the work of Christ ....”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, as I see it, the church poses no direct threat to the correct understanding of the notion of *laïcité*.<sup>7</sup> This should become apparent as this article develops. In reading the signs of the times the Council recognized a crisis of growth in human consciousness and that “in the gradual and precise unfolding of the laws of social living [people] are uncertain about how to plot its course.”<sup>8</sup> The Council further noted that “if there is a growing exchange of ideas, there is still a widespread disagreement in competing ideologies about the meaning of the words which express our key concepts.”<sup>9</sup> I recognize among “competing ideologies” a perceived situation of Church vs State. The Church, a religious ideology, and the State, a secular ideology are two differing images of human society that are accepted and subsequently govern the affairs of humanity.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> All quotes from *Gaudium et Spes* are taken from Flannery, Austin (1996) *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents* Costello Publishing (N.Y.) and Dominican Publications (Ireland).

<sup>5</sup> Article 2.

<sup>6</sup> Art. 3.

<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this essay, I consider the principle of *laïcité* originating in the long evolutionary relationship between Church and State culminating in the “Peace of Westphalia” in 1648 which, in turn, laid the foundations for the modern nation-state. *Laïcité* defines a place (philosophically and practically) for religion in society while respecting public order and public institutions. Vatican Council II recognized the autonomy and independence of the civil society stating that the civil authority need not recognize any superior jurisdiction to itself in regulating its own affairs.

<sup>8</sup> Art 4.

<sup>9</sup> Art. 4.

<sup>10</sup> In my view, as images in Western society both hide their ideologies. The Church, as a department of State, conceals its ideology of a modified Christendom to which it hopes to return. The State, on the other hand, seeks the neutrality of a secular entity via hidden ideologies in the contemporary entertainment industry, the mass media and global politics.

Foreshadowing the evolution from humanism (a classical concept) to posthumanity (a phenomenological concept) the Council noted that there are developments “on the intellectual level by the mathematical, natural and human sciences and on the practical level by their repercussions on technology.”<sup>11</sup> This insight is proving to be significant given the many and various studies in posthumanism and transhumanism. The Council further acknowledged that “in many places it is not only in philosophical terms that such trends are expressed, there are signs of them in literature, art, the humanities, the interpretation of history and even *civil law*: all of which is very disturbing to many people” [my italics].<sup>12</sup> But *laïcité*, when correctly understood, need not be disturbing to the religiously faithful. With more emphasis on a philosophical understanding and less emphasis on a political understanding *laïcité* can have a positive outcome from both the perspective of church and state. As I hope to show, *laïcité* interpreted from the philosophical perspective evident in *Gaudium et Spes* can protect the faithful from undue disturbance and lessen civil strife over religious differences in the community.

In our civilization there is a need for a philosophy to serve humanity within its contemporary religious and cultural life. This requires a recognition that the traditional agency of Christendom, a religious agency of cause and effect, is no longer adequate for the modern world and will most likely be questioned within a posthuman world. In the Council’s words: “People are becoming conscious that the forces they have unleashed are in their own hands and that it is up to themselves to control them or be enslaved by them.”<sup>13</sup> In short, God is not responsible for everything anymore. It is in this context that *laïcité* is to be interpreted, I contend. Political ideologies, religious or secular, need to be regulated if solutions to conflict are to be found that are truly human. For this to occur “the establishment of a universally acknowledged public authority vested with the effective power to ensure security for all, regard for justice, and respect for the law” must take place.<sup>14</sup> *Laïcité*, properly understood, has the potential to point the way here. Quoting scripture to affirm the divine origin of humanity, the Council employs the phrase *the image of God* in this constitution. I find it a philosophical curiosity that it omits the clause *and in our likeness* in its wording.<sup>15</sup> Does this choice suggest an intention to direct theologians away from considering a status for humanity that may be greater than a mere image? In my Western philosophical perspective “image” and “likeness” are to be distinguished. Likeness connotes a sense of a divine quality that image lacks. The Hebrew text removes the possibility of thinking that God depended upon any previous creaturely image in the creation of humanity. But that is a thought for another discussion among linguists, philosophers and theologians. However, it is with that exclusion that the understanding of human beings, created in the image and likeness of God as male and female, has evolved. Traditionally, dignity or ennoblement, was understood by theologians to be pertaining exclusively to the norms of the human intellect and the norms of moral consciousness understood as one law when applied to an individual being. That is to say in the Council’s words concerning individual beings, “their dignity rests in observing this law, and by it they will be

---

<sup>11</sup> Art. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Art. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Art. 10. In this context, the visible presence of the Church and the visible presence of the State, both present a notion of effective power.

<sup>14</sup> Art. 82

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Gen. I: 26-27.

judged.”<sup>16</sup> In short, dignity (ennoblement) was attributed to the unique mental qualities of the human being which set it apart. In modern times, however, the Council noted that “there is a growing awareness of the sublime dignity of human persons, who stand above all things and whose rights and duties are universal and inviolable.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, dignity (ennoblement) is now understood as constitutive of the individual being itself (male or female) as a human person, and not simply as a quality of an animated being with superior intellect.<sup>18</sup>

A unique intellectual development within Christendom that deserves philosophical attention is atheism and its relative, anti-theism. Both, in the mind of the Church, prevent humanity from attaining the “the noble state to which it was born.”<sup>19</sup> And yet, from a Christian perspective the faithful must be atheists in regard to the gods appearing in the natural and pre-Christian unredeemed order. The Council is correct in deploring the discrimination between believers and unbelievers which some civil authorities unjustly continue to promote, especially through a misunderstanding of *laïcité*.<sup>20</sup> The Council seeks the betterment of the person and the improvement of society. While both are significant in the mind of the church’s teaching, they are not equivalent, but dependent upon each other. “The social order and its development must constantly yield to the good of the person, since the order of things must be subordinate to the order of persons and not the other way around..., as the document states.”<sup>21</sup> I hope to show that properly understood *laïcité* has the good of the church and the good of society as goal. Freed from the fetters of state responsibility, the church can then truly preach the gospel without earthly ambition. Such autonomy, if realized, will carry with it a responsibility to raise the level of culture in the social order of humanity according to the Council. “To help individuals to carry out more carefully their obligations in conscience towards themselves and towards the various groups to which they belong, they must be carefully educated to a higher degree of culture” which is required for service to the community at large, believers and unbelievers alike.<sup>22</sup>

This task of carrying out obligations in conscience in the social order of humanity is to be accomplished by believers in the light of revelation, according to the Council, and not by revelation; that is to say, the believer is the agent, not God in the social order of humanity. Philosophically then, human understanding in a “higher degree of culture” suggests that creative agency is with humanity, not with the divinity. Adopting the perspective illustrates a significant shift in the church’s understanding of itself in the modern world. As a result, the single world-wide community of humanity “now produces by its own enterprise many things which in former times it expected would come largely from heavenly powers.”<sup>23</sup> However, the autonomy of human

---

<sup>16</sup> Art. 16.

<sup>17</sup> Art. 26.

<sup>18</sup> It is to be noted that from a Western philosophical and legal perspective, not all human beings are human persons. Being and personhood are not to be equated.

<sup>19</sup> Art. 21.

<sup>20</sup> Understood correctly *laïcité* does not require believers to become unbelievers or vice versa. As a French text expresses it: *La laïcité garantit aux croyants et aux non-croyants le même droit à la liberté d’expression de leurs croyances ou convictions. Elle assure aussi bien le droit d’avoir ou de ne pas avoir de religion, d’en changer ou de ne plus en avoir. Elle garantit le libre exercice des cultes et la liberté de religion, mais aussi la liberté vis-à-vis de la religion: personne ne peut être contraint au respect de dogmes ou prescriptions religieuses.*

<sup>21</sup> Art. 26.

<sup>22</sup> Art. 31.

<sup>23</sup> Art. 33.

agency in earthly affairs does not exclude the presence of God in earthly affairs, according to the teaching of the Council. In light of this document's pastoral intention, I find it curious that the Council's teaching on material creation seems to omit the fact that the person (composed of matter and spirit) is part of material creation, albeit a unique part. "By the very nature of creation, material being is endowed with its own stability, truth and excellence, its own order and laws. These, as the methods proper to every science and technique must be respected."<sup>24</sup> It appears that the traditional understanding that "persons are *in* the world, not *of* the world" is maintained in the mind of the Council.

As I interpret Chapter IV of *Gaudium et Spes*, it opens with a significant paragraph intended as an introduction to Part II of the constitution. "All we have said up to now about the dignity of the human person, the community of men and women, and the deep significance of human activity, provides a basis for discussing the relationship between the church and the world and the dialogue between them. The council now intends to consider the presence of the church in the world, and its life and activity there, in the light of what it has already declared about the mystery of the church."<sup>25</sup> Philosophically, it is worth remembering that the "world" (composed of national and ethnic social realities – many recognized as states.) undertakes its own discussion with the church (a transnational social reality).<sup>26</sup> To my mind, this activity presents an opportunity for the philosopher to re-consider the principle of *laïcité* within the dialogue between church and state from a contemporary philosophical perspective, instead of a political perspective.<sup>27</sup> Clearly, many philosophers recognize that the current political dialogue is not between equal partners, nor is it undertaken in a spirit of cooperation, but rather in one of confrontation and lack of trust. In a contrary spirit, however, the Council emphasizes that "by its nature and mission the church is universal in that it is not committed to any one culture or to any political, economic or social system. Hence, it can be a very close bond between the various communities of people and nations, provided they trust the church and guarantee it true freedom to carry out its mission. ... The church desires nothing more ardently than that it should develop in freedom in the service of all, under any regime which recognizes the basic rights of the person and the family, and the requirements of the common good."<sup>28</sup> To my mind, this understanding is compatible with a proper understanding of *laïcité* and, in fact, it deserves support from all people who understand rapid social and cultural change. In admitting that the church receives something from the world the Constitution reads: "Nowadays when things change so rapidly and thought patterns differ so widely, the church needs to step up this exchange by calling upon the help of people who are living in the world, who are expert in its organizations and its forms of training, and who understand its mentality, in the case of believers and non-believers alike."<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Art. 36.

<sup>25</sup> Art. 40.

<sup>26</sup> The modern notion of a nation state, even though not all nations are states, is likely to remain a political reality for well into the future of global administration. It is currently the primary model for political territorial organization and the locus for optional coercive political power. In understanding of modern life many hold that political identity belongs to the state and cultural identity belongs to the nation. Cultural identity is characterized by intimacy and plurality of communities. Political identity is characterized by a lack of intimacy and a tendency to uniformity.

<sup>27</sup> For those interested in a brief and inexhaustive treatment see *my Religion and Governance: Re-thinking the American Perspective* Lambert Academic Publishing (2017).

<sup>28</sup> Art. 42.

<sup>29</sup> Art. 44.

After treating specifically of the family, love and marriage the Council considers the development of cultural issues stating that, “whenever, therefore, there is a question of human life, nature and culture are intimately linked together” such that “one is entitled to speak of a new age of human history; hence new ways are opened up for the development and diffusion of culture.”<sup>30</sup> *Laïcité*, then, properly understood as a modern philosophical and sociological principle belongs to the development and diffusion of culture, as I interpret the Council’s pastoral intent. As a philosophical principle *laïcité* transcends mere political opinion. As a French text states: *La laïcité n'est pas une opinion parmi d'autres mais la liberté d'en avoir une. Elle n'est pas une conviction mais le principe qui les autorise toutes, sous réserve du respect de l'ordre public.* The Council continues: “In pastoral care sufficient use should be made, not only of theological principles, but also of the findings of the secular sciences, especially psychology and sociology: in this way the faithful will be brought to a purer and more mature living of the faith.”<sup>31</sup>

*Laïcité*, is an intellectual concept arising out of the mentality of the nation state, often simply known as the state. Philosophically, the state itself is a human intellectual and normative construct originating in the science that treats of the organization of social goals.<sup>32</sup> The language of *Gaudium et Spes*, does not speak of the state as a substantive reality, but rather as a representation of a social, political and civic concrete community. The Constitution reads, “the choice of the political regime and the appointment of rulers are left to the free decision of the citizens. It follows that political authority, either within the political community as such *or through organizations representing the state*, [my italics] must be exercised within the limits of the moral order and directed towards the common good ...” which citizens are bound to obey in conscience.<sup>33</sup> In short, from a philosophical perspective, the mind of the Council is that the state is an abstract and changeable concept, and it is that in which political regimes exist. In light of this philosophical presentation, the following paragraph makes sense in the contemporary context. “The political community [existing within state boundaries] and the church [transcending state boundaries] are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields. They are both at the service of the personal and social vocation of the same individuals, though under different titles.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, to my mind, it is curious that these titles lead to confrontation, rather than cooperation in their relationship. As I see it, the foregoing interpretation of *Gaudium et Spes*, and *laïcité* present philosophical issues concerning the interpretation of “church and state” that will likely continue to concern the church in a posthuman world.

---

<sup>30</sup> Art. 53 & 54.

<sup>31</sup> Art. 62.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. James K. Feibleman, s. v. “Politics” in *Dictionary of Philosophy: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* (Ed. Dagobert Runes, 1963) Littlefield Adams.

<sup>33</sup> Art. 74.

<sup>34</sup> Art. 76.